

A view of The Big Match

By Anura Gunasekera

In the beginning there was the Royal-Thomian. Then followed the others , pre-fixed as "Big" and identified by different colours, religious figures , fruits and thus invested with significance; "The Battle",of this , that and the other!!! But The Royal – Thomian, supreme in its uniqueness, stands aloof from the herd and will always be "The Big Match".

This Match is not all about playing cricket , although there is cricket out there on the green; it is a meeting of people and attitudes, a Woodstockian extravaganza which encompasses the past , the present and the future ; It is a three day saturnalia, both magical and surreal, disconnected from mainstream life and activity, although the latter flows around it, unnoticed. It is something that you can truly understand, only if you are a Thomian or a Royalist, or if at some distant stage of your life, you have been one or the other.

The Match is also a rite of tribalism, belonging to a special brotherhood with restricted admission. Transcending barriers of age, race, creed, social, economic, and professional inequalities and other disparities, the one pre-requisite, non-negotiable commonality being affiliation to one or the other fraternity.

If the foregoing reeks of exclusivity it was both unavoidable and calculated.

The Royal – Thomian is too special to be inclusive although it is enjoyed by many others. Whilst there may be more spectators , who belong to neither school, enjoying the proceedings as much as the tribesmen do , deep inside, they do not experience what the Royal – Thomian brotherhood feels and they know it.

Does that sound smug, arrogant, condescending? Perhaps, but that is the reality.

Entering the SSC on Match day is to encounter a time –warp. As you enter the arena, you are hit by a living wall of sound; horns blare, bands play at top volume, mens' voices boom, and women and children scream; songs are being sung, bawdy, lurid, fervent and mostly off key. Flags are waved and rattles wrung; drums are beaten and cymbals clash. Renditions of "Thomians Young and Thomians Old", and "Disce Aut Disce De" emerge frequently from the cacophony. An agglomeration of sounds and sights which assail your senses and totally unacceptable, offensive, in any other setting, but perfectly normal and fitting at the Royal-Thomian. There is also an immediate sense of déjà vu. You have heard it all before, many times.

I am an Old Thomian; old because I will very soon be seventy. But I am still a Thomian and I am most sharply reminded of this fact every year, when I walk in to the match venue. I first witnessed the match in 1955, the year I entered College, escorted to the P. Sara Oval by my maternal grandfather. In later years, unhindered by adult supervision, I became an enthusiastic member of the raucous bands which snarled up city traffic, disrupted classes in leading girls' schools, caused headaches to the Colombo Police and, not infrequently, unceremoniously ejected from well known eating houses and cinema halls.

The Match is most special to those who have participated in the contest. I must confess to a slight feeling of envy when, at the Match, I meet those contemporaries of mine, who have actually handled willow and leather on the green. They are both the heroes and the villains, the victors and the vanquished, who have a sense of belonging that non-players can never simulate. I have played in other Royal-Thomians - Rugby - but the defining Royal-Thomian still remains, and will always be, the Cricket Match.

In all sport there is winning and losing, joy and despair but, unarguably, cricket encompasses those emotions more significantly than in any other sport. Perhaps it is because of the length of the contest. It is a game full of opportunities and each one, at the end of the day, could decide between celebration and anguish. It is that terrible knowledge, that the catch dropped in the first minute of play, the stumping fumbled, the missed run-out, the rash stroke resulting in an untimely dismissal, could spell the difference between victory and defeat on day three or five. However brave you may be, doubt will gnaw at your guts till the end of the match, for it is only then that you will see the consequences of your error of the first minute, or the first over. And believe me, when you do it at the Royal – Thomian, you will never be allowed to forget it.

For those fortunate and gifted people who have actually played in the Match, there is the unforgettable joy of winning, pride in significant accomplishments with either bat or ball- chronicled in the Match souvenirs – the pain of missed opportunities, the fruitless but inevitable conjecture on what may have been and the agony of defeat. For them it is the realization of dreams dreamt as little boys in blue shorts and white shirts, playing soft ball cricket in the lunch interval or after school, dreams which have ended either in joy or pain out there on the dusty track. The Match is steeped in history and tradition and each year, out there in the park, history awaits, to be re-written by the star performer, be it bowler, batsman or fielder.

Then there are the special enclosures, - Mustangs, Stallions and Colts – which have lately spawned several other equine derivatives, in which the spirit of the encounter is best captured. Being collectives of like minded, accredited, "old boy" members of both schools, these are unique assemblies not represented in any of the other tents. The later additions admit wives and children but the first three remain adamantly, unapologetically, male and for special members of the tribe only. They are enclaves of exclusivity within an already exclusive ambience.

These enclosures are unique meeting places. There are those who meet each other only in the "Tent", at the Match. There are relationships which have no continuity, born of a shared past but with neither a present nor a future and relevant only in the context of the Match. The amazing factor is that lost threads are immediately re-gathered, old conversations resumed and old friendships re-cemented as if there has been no break, in between. These "Tents" are places where ancient rivalries between the two schools are rekindled, but without the rasping competitiveness of youth, now with nostalgia and much gentleness, with mutual respect and laughter. The same war stories are recounted, year after year but in this time, in this place, the gloss is restored and never fails to generate the same pleasure and excitement. This cycle is repeated, year after year and each time it feels new. Time stands still as the present reverts back to a cherished past and an old, fragmented, mosaic comes together, seamlessly.

How does one explain this mystique to an outsider?

The Match is a forum which has ignited fierce rivalry, intense competitiveness out there on the field, thereafter metamorphosing in to lasting friendships between combatants, where the victor shares the loser's grief and the loser the victor's joy, both in total sincerity. That is the spirit of the Match and the symbol of a special spirit, a special brotherhood that is both Royal and St. Thomas's . It is a spirit which had its unconscious genesis in the first Royal-Thomian encounter and has been fostered since then. It is a spirit that must never be allowed to die because it is too fine a thing to lose. When stumps are drawn and the competitors smile at each other and walk back to the pavilion together, the camaraderie thus achieved is a greater victory than any win-loss decision.

It is also in these special enclaves that one is confronted with the frailties of life and the sense of one's own mortality. You see those sporting giants of one's youth, those who sent down fearsome deliveries, those who with a casual flick of the wrist sent the ball down to the ropes or out of the ground, now grizzled, slightly stooped, once broad shoulders shrunk, the spring gone from the stride, hesitantly negotiating the steps up to seating area. Then you are sharply reminded of the inexorable passage of time, especially in that sombre moment when the obituaries are read out and all those present observe the traditional silence, in honour of those members who have moved on, since the previous match; names of friends, team-mates, classmates, familiars of both schools.

There is also the certain but unspoken knowledge that one day, at some future Big Match, those who are left behind will be standing when your name is read out.

But the Match is a rite that will go on as, whilst the tribe diminishes each year, it is also renewed and enlivened.